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ABSTRACT

To continue upper division coursework past 15 credit hours, students at Southwest Texas State University must pass the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) General Examination in English Composition with Essay, with a minimum score of 421 and 45 semester hours of credit, and the CLEP General Examination in Mathematics, with a minimum score of 460 (to be raised to 477 in 1988-90) and completion of the required algebra course. There is no limit on the number of times a student may take the tests, and there are appeals procedures for students who fail them twice. The university provides resources for exam preparation. Academic deans may override the exam requirement for up to six hours of upper division work. Data are gathered to ensure that students failing the exams get advising and remediation. In future, tracking and follow-up to determine effectiveness in preparing students for upper division coursework will be implemented. Results so far suggest that the advancement examination program can improve the university's reputation and student motivation and can help assess the quality of curriculum and instruction. (Author/MSE)

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GENERAL STUDIES ADVANCEMENT EXAMINATIONS IN WRITING AND MATHEMATICS

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Program's Starting Date:
General Studies Examination in Writing: Fall 1986
General Studies Examination in Mathematics: Fall 1988

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AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory is a two-year project seeking to establish and test a model system for collecting and disseminating information on model programs at AASCU-member institutions--375 of the public four-year colleges and universities in the United States.

The four objectives of the project are:

- To increase the information on model programs available to all institutions through the ERIC system
- To encourage the use of the ERIC system by AASCU institutions
- To improve AASCU's ability to know about, and share information on, activities at member institutions, and
- To test a model for collaboration with ERIC that other national organizations might adopt.

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project is funded with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, in collaboration with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education at The George Washington University.

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ABSTRACT

In order to continue SWT upper division course work past fifteen credit hours, students must pass the General Studies Examinations in Writing (GSEW) and in Mathematics (GSEM). To test students' writing skills, the College of General Studies requires students to pass the CLEP General Examination in English Composition with Essay with a minimum scaled score of 421. To be eligible to take the GSEW, students must have credit for a total of 45 semester hours, including credit for freshman composition and sophomore English. To test students' mathematics skills, the College of General Studies requires students to pass the CLEP General Examination in Mathematics with a minimum score of 460 (for the 1988-90 catalog; the score will be raised in subsequent catalogs to 477). Students take the examination after they have completed the required college algebra course.

There is no limit on the number of times a student may take the exams; there are appeals procedures for students who have failed the exams twice; and the university provides a number of resources for helping students prepare for the exams. When extenuating circumstances warrant, academic deans may give overrides for up to six hours of upper division work beyond the fifteen allowed.

Evaluation procedures of the GSEW to date consist primarily of data gathering in order to insure that students who fail get advising and remediation. Evaluation procedures in the future will include tracking and follow-up to determine effectiveness in preparing students for upper-division course work. "Native" students who have taken composition courses at SWT have a higher pass rate than do transfer students who have taken compositions courses elsewhere. Data also indicates a high correlation between students' grades in English 1310 at SWT and their passing scores on the GSEW. Limited data is available regarding GSEM results, since primarily transfer students have taken the exam. Their pass rate is 85%.

An advancement examination program can yield good results for a university's reputation, for student motivation, and for assessing the quality of curriculum and instruction.

INTRODUCTION

In Fall 1986, Southwest Texas State University implemented the General Studies Examination in Writing, and in Fall 1988, the General Studies Examination in Mathematics. The premise is important and simple: students in upper division courses should already possess competent collegiate writing and mathematical skills. The advancement testing program is intended to uphold this academic standard.

This report will provide background information (the justification for using a test score rather than a course grade, selection of the test and the cutoff score, identification of students who must take the test), a description of the testing program, the results of the program, and conclusions and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The faculty committees which created the General Studies curriculum agreed that students should acquire and maintain collegiate writing skills and mandated six hours of freshman composition and eighteen hours of "writing intensive" (WI) courses. In a "writing intensive" course no less than 65% of the student's grade comes from written work, such as essay tests, research papers, reports, or case studies, and at least one piece of writing should exceed 500 words. Nine hours of WI courses are within the proscribed curriculum in History 1310 and 1320 and Philosophy 1305, and students may choose the remaining nine hours from more than 200 courses across the curriculum.

Competent collegiate writing skills were defined as the exit level of English 1320, the second semester of freshman composition. Two factors make the completion of that course an inadequate guarantee that a student currently functions at that skill level. First, writing is a procedural skills; in other words, it is acquired and maintained through practice and self-correction, a product of graded papers. An acquired procedural skill such as writing usually decays if it is not used. Therefore, a

student may have had the skill at one time but no longer possess it. Also, an increasing number of SWT students interrupt their college careers and later reenter school. A second factor is that approximately half of the SWT undergraduate student body are transfer students who have taken freshman composition courses from other institutions

It became increasingly evident that an out-of-class testing program would be the only appropriate choice to insure the writing ability standard, and such a testing program would work only if test selection, setting of the cutoff score, and implementation procedures were competently done. If the test were to be the barrier to upper division work, when should students take it? For the SWT "native" student, i.e., the student who has no transfer credits, that time is after the completion of 45 hours, which would include freshman composition, sophomore literature, and the writing intensive courses in American history. However, many transfer students enter SWT with more than 60 hours, and they should be allowed to register for upper division work their first semester before taking the test. In order to treat both native and transfer students equitably, the barrier was set after fifteen hours of upper division course work. Students must pass the test to continue their enrollment in upper division course work past the fifteen-hour limit.

Competent collegiate mathematics skills were defined as knowledge of college algebra. For both the SWT "native" student and the transfer student, the General Studies Examination in Mathematics should be taken after the student has successfully completed Math 1315 or 1319, College Algebra.

Test Selection

The faculty committee recognized that SWT did not have the resources to develop a test or to grade thousands of essays each year. The committee selected a national, normed test with a writing sample which would be graded off campus. English Department faculty helped the committee select the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) General Examination in English with Essay, and a pilot study was done using nine English 1320 classes in Spring 1986. The test has two sections--multiple choice questions which test the knowledge of logical and structural relationships within

sentences and an essay question. The grading of the essay portion by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) is a tightly controlled procedure which provides reliable and valid scores.

Likewise, the CLEP General Examination in Mathematics was selected for the mathematics test. A pilot study was done using 495 students in four sections of Math 1315 and three sections of Math 1319 in the fall of 1987. The test consists of two subtests; the first has questions which test high school level skills, the second, college level skills.

Cutoff Score

Writing

Selecting a cutoff score proved to be complex and difficult. The scaled scores provided by the College Board and ETS are based on 1963 norms which appear to be inflated. Furthermore, the test has not been previously used as a barrier exam. Nevertheless, the structure, content, and grading system of this test were unquestionably the most appropriate for SWT's purposes, so the pilot study data was analyzed as the search for the cutoff score continued. The pilot data was helpful, but somewhat inconsistent, and in conjunction with the opinions of the English faculty, the committee selected a score range which it felt would reflect the desired level of collegiate writing. The final selection of a score within that range--421--came in response to the recently published guidelines from the American Council on Education for this particular test. The cutoff score of 421 is the lower end of the Council's recommendation. Although 421 is at the 22nd percentile on those 1963 norms, both ETS and the Council perceive 421 as the lowest acceptable score on this examination.

Mathematics

The General Studies Advisory Council approved a minimum passing score of 477 (43rd percentile); however, the minimum passing score of 460 was implemented for the 1988-90 catalog. The score is to be raised to 477 in subsequent catalogs. The American Council on Education (ACE) recommended cutscore range is 421-500.

DESCRIPTION

Implementation

Implementing an academic policy which places a barrier to further study mandates careful attention to ethical and legal issues. Eventually all undergraduate students at SWT will have to pass this standard, but the implementation must follow state and local guidelines. Students who are "under" the 1986-88 and subsequent catalogs, i.e. who are pursuing a degree plan in that and subsequent catalogs, must pass this standard. Thus, all the freshmen entering SWT in Fall 1986 had the 1986 catalog designation, and all freshmen entering SWT in Fall 1988 had the 1988 catalog designation. Second, transfer students from out-of-state or Texas senior institutions who entered SWT in Fall of 1986 are under the 86-88 catalog, and those who entered SWT in Fall of 1988 are under the 88-90 catalog. Third, re-entry and Texas junior college transfers whose initial college enrollment was prior to 1980 are under the 86-88 catalog, and those whose initial college enrollment was prior to 1982 are under the 88-90 catalog. Re-entry and Texas junior college transfers whose initial college enrollment occurred since August 1980 are not under the 86-88 catalog; those students are under prior catalogs according to local and Coordinating Board policies. Academic school deans may change the catalog designation of a student by notifying the University Testing Center. Student advisory transcripts will show the 86-88, 88-90, and future catalog designations.

Notification

The University has made a determined effort to ensure that all students under the 86-88 and subsequent catalogs are aware of these tests and the consequences of failing them. All transfer and re-entry students receive a letter about the tests with their acceptance from the University. Another letter is mailed to their university address during the first semester they are enrolled. Announcements are made in Orientation sessions, and, of course, the policy is stated in the catalog. Departmental advisors play a key role in helping students decide the best semester in which to take the tests.

Administration of the Tests

The University Testing Center administers the tests four times a year, during the first week of October, March, December, and June. Students register for the local test administrations through the Testing Center and pay a fee of $35.

Access to the Test

Access to the test, or the number of times a student may attempt it, is a critical issue. The General Studies Council determined that students should have unlimited access to the writing test for several reasons. First, the test involves the writing of an essay, and the objective portion of this test has a correction for guessing. Therefore, simply retaking the test without improving the skill should not improve the student's score. Second, the test is only available locally four times a year.

Appeals

A Faculty Senate Appeals Committee with representation from each school will hear two types of appeals. Physically handicapped or learning disabled students may request special conditions, and students who have failed the writing test twice and who have made at least a C in a review course may appeal.

Overrides

Occasionally there may be a legitimate reason that the 15 hour upper division barrier be temporarily overridden. The academic school deans have agreed to the following guidelines for the Override Policy. A student will be allowed to repeat an upper division course with departmental approval. If General Studies makes an error in catalog designation or the recording of a test score, the General Studies office will override the barrier for one semester until the correction is made in the computer files. An academic dean can allow up to six additional hours of upper division work if (a) the catalog designation came too late for the student to take the test, (b) the student can provide documentation that illness or a family emergency prevented the taking of the test, or (c) the student

transferred to SWT with more than 60 hours but without the equivalent of English 1320. Under the last circumstance the student must register for English 1320 during the first semester enrolled and take the test during the second semester enrolled.

Resources for the Student

This General Studies policy on writing skills clearly holds the student responsible for the acquisition and maintenance of competent collegiate writing skills. However, there are many resources available to any SWT student. Many SWT faculty demand writing from their students, whether the course is labeled writing intensive or not, and they take the time to grade and mark the students' work. The English composition classes have a diagnostic essay during the first week of classes which helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses in writing. Four free academic support services provide help in writing skills--the Write Stuff which is a writing laboratory in the Department of English, the Student Learning Assistance Center (SLAC), Special Services, and the Residence Hall Tutoring Program. Two free academic support services provide help in mathematics skills--the Student Learning Assistance Center (SLAC) and the Math Lab.

RESULTS - INTERIM FINDINGS

General Studies Examination in Writing (GSEW)

Evaluation procedures to date consist primarily of data gathering in order to insure that students who fail get advising and remediation. Results indicate that non-credit remediation is not especially successful for students who score below 400 on the exam. Evaluation procedures in the future will include tracking and follow-up to determine the university's effectiveness in preparing students for upper-division course work.

Students taking the exam for the first time who are "natives" and who have taken both freshman composition courses (English 1310 and 1320) at SWT have a pass rate of approximately 76%.

Transfer students taking the exam for the first time who have taken neither of the freshman composition courses at SWT have a pass rate of approximately 65%. There are a small number of students who are "natives" but who take freshman composition elsewhere and an equally small number of transfer students who take freshman composition at SWT. The pass rate of the former group is comparable to that of transfers who take freshman composition elsewhere (65%); the pass rate of the latter group is comparable to that of "natives" who take freshman composition at SWT (76%).

Data also indicates that there is a high correlation between students' grades in English 1310 at SWT and their passing scores on the GSEW. Those who earn a grade of A in English 1310 have a 90% pass rate, those who earn a B have an 89% pass rate, those who earn a C have a 76% pass rate, those who earn a D have a 65% pass rate, and those who earn an F have a 40% pass rate. Such data indicates that location of freshman composition courses has a direct bearing on the percent passing. It also indicates that SWT's composition courses reflect more of the content and standard that the CLEP exam requires than do composition courses elsewhere, even though the English faculty have made no significant changes in their courses in response to the GSEW requirement and have not taught to the test.

General Studies Examination in Mathematics (GSEM)

This exam has been given only three times to date and has been taken primarily by transfer students. The pass rate for these students, most of whom have not taken college algebra (Math 1315 or Math 1319) at SWT, is 85%. Since so few "native" SWT students have taken the GSEM, data on which to base results is not yet available.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An advancement examination program can yield good results for a campus. Faculty believe that the institution is trying to impose some minimum qualitative standards. The publicity can be favorable, especially if the test scope and level are collegiate in nature. A powerful result is the effect on student motivation. When students realize that the tests are barriers to continuance, they will focus on attaining the skills.

The data on aggregate student test performance is also a rich resource for the campus. The information can be used to help assess the quality of curriculum and instruction, although such evaluation must be carefully done with faculty involvement.

When the myriad decisions about a testing program are made thoughtfully by a large segment of the campus, then the program becomes an opportunity for a college to move toward its academic goals.